

RPG Reload File 006 – 'Sword Of Fargoal'

[September 17, 2014](#) by [Shaun Musgrave](#)



Hello, gentle readers, and welcome back to the **RPG Reload**, the weekly journey to seek the long-buried legends of iOS RPGs, revisit them, and escape within 2,000 words. I haven't succeeded in that yet, and I'm pretty sure today isn't going to buck that trend. As this week's installment hopefully demonstrates, we are welcome to all kinds of RPGs here in the **Reload**, and while I will do my best to share the love around, there is someone who can keep an eye on me to make sure I'm not sticking too closely to my comfort zone. That someone is you. Yes, as regular readers know, once a month, I'm playing and writing about an RPG selected by the readers. The next reader's choice is coming up pretty fast in **RPG Reload 008**, so get your votes in now by leaving a comment below or posting in the [Official RPG Reload Club](#) in our forums. This is your last week to cast a vote, because even Batman needs prep time. In addition to voting, I'd also love to hear your thoughts on this week's game or any other games I've covered. I'm also not going to say no to any fresh humor, just throwing that out there.

This weekly feature is still pretty young, but we've already spent more than half of the articles talking about classics that originated on other hardware. Up until now, those have been fairly straight ports of the games in question, but this week is a little different. *Sword of Fargoal* ([Free](#)) is handily the oldest game featured yet, but the iOS version is also a fairly extensive remake. What that means is that even though *E.T.* was still in the middle of phoning home when this game was first released, it's still quite playable today for just

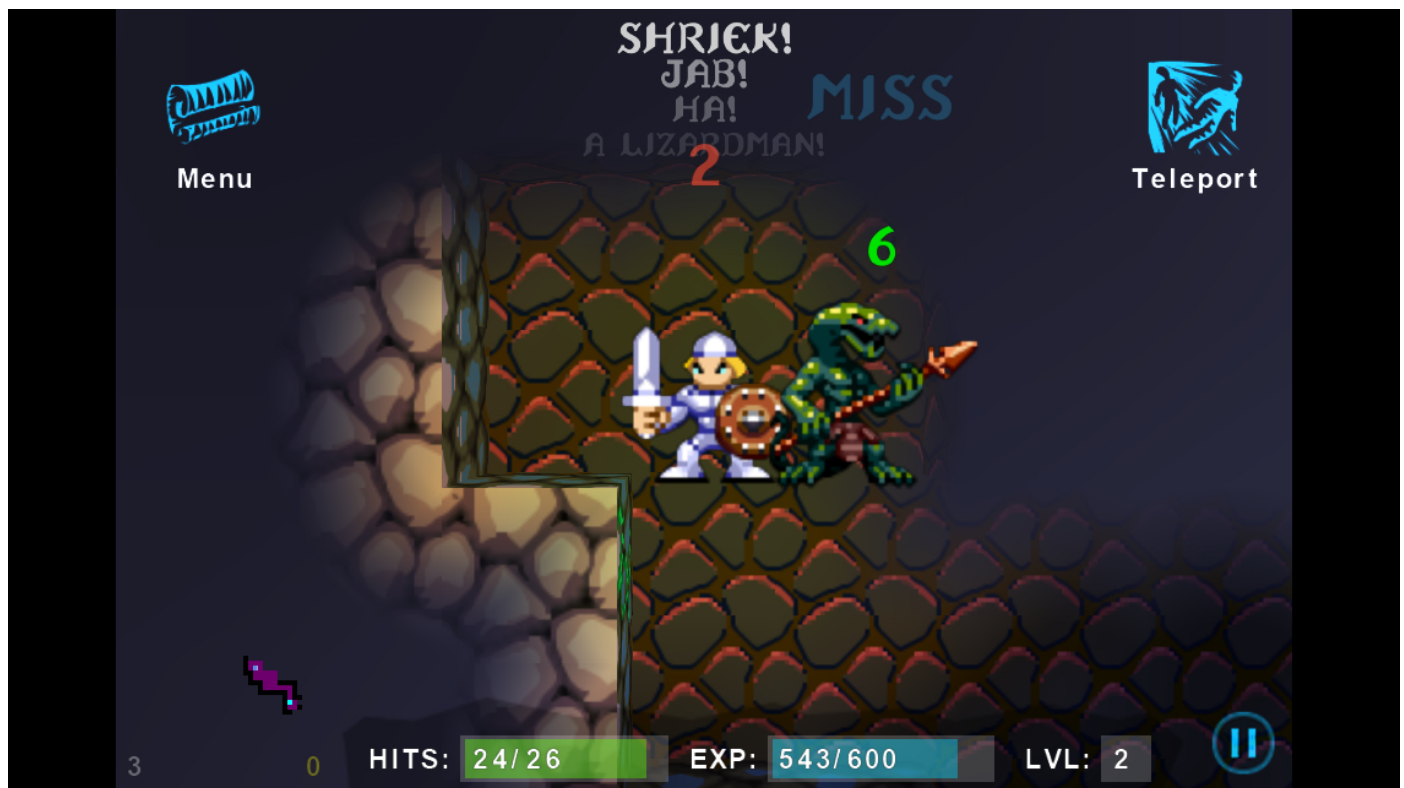
about anyone. Of course, this remake is itself getting to be a bit vintage, having released more than five years ago, so it's not without its prickly points. Nevertheless, it's still a cherished app for many a mobile gamer, and the torch still burns brightly for its long-delayed sequel.



Sword of Fargoal is a roguelike from a time when the word 'roguelike' didn't exist. Gaming's early history isn't as well-documented as we'd like, but *Sword of Fargoal*'s 1982 release on the Commodore VIC-20 was only a couple of years after the release of *Rogue*, putting it somewhere around the earliest five to ten games in the genre. It's the 1983 Commodore 64 release of the game that is most fondly-remembered, with the game making its way onto many a shared floppy filled with pirated games, and presumably at least a few sales of the actual game. I have to confess, much of my experience with that version of the game was from a disk with a hand-written label. Sorry, Mr. McCord, young Shaun didn't know much better. Still, it was a cherished experience in my childhood, a game that I simply could not beat no matter how often I tried, yet still brought me back thanks to the excitement of its random dungeon floors. I'm reasonably sure this was my first roguelike, and since video games had a lot of unfair rules at the time, it

wasn't the bitterly frustrating experience that someone coming in today might think it to be.

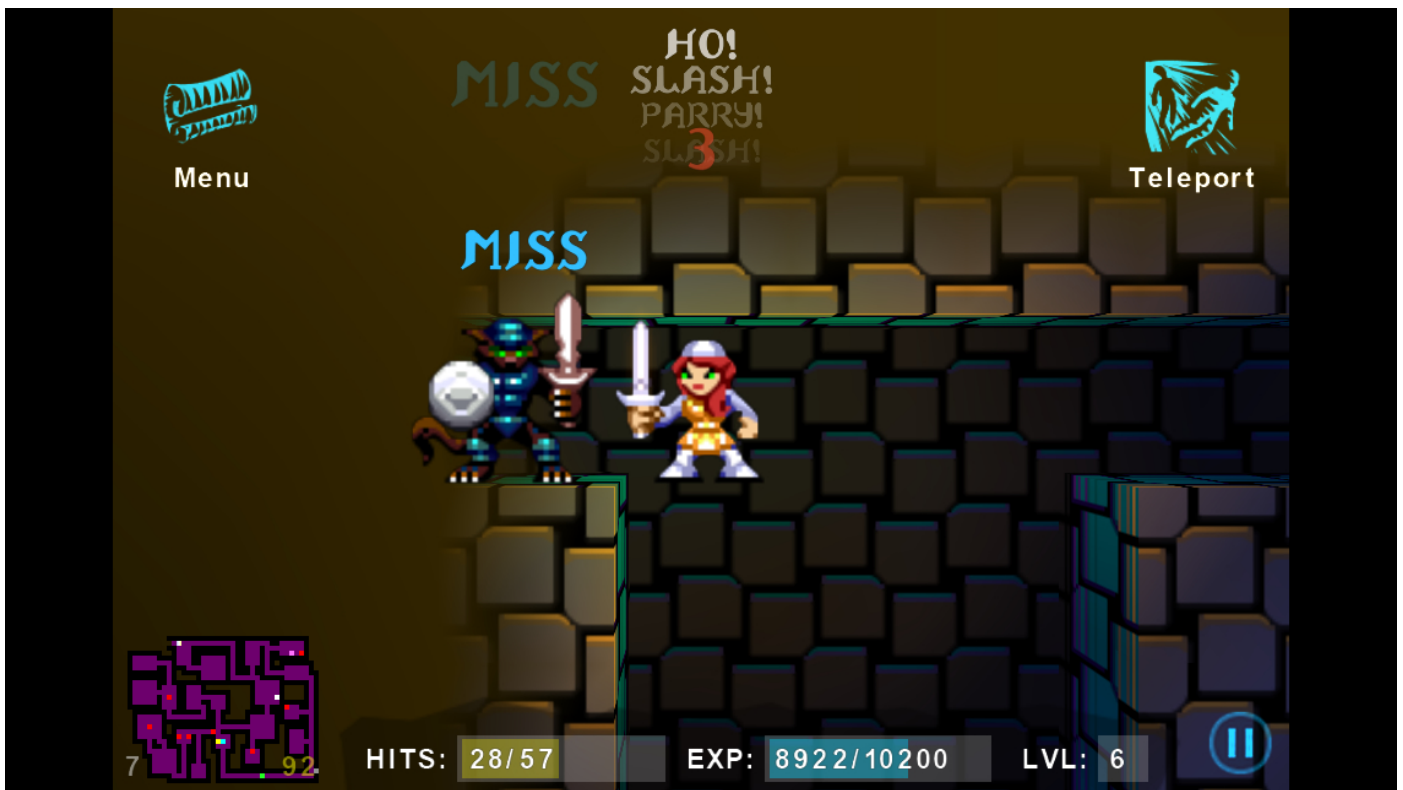
The game was originally created by one guy, as was the style at the time. Jeff McCord, barely out of high school, put the game together based on an earlier game he created called *Gammaquest II* for the Commodore PET. Interestingly, the VIC-20 version was written entirely in BASIC programming language, though it was rewritten for the C64 version with the help of Scott Corsaire and Steve Lepisto. Although there was no follow-up, it remained a well-regarded cult classic through the years, eventually being brought to the PC and Mac in a more or less preserved form, before getting its official remake in 2009 courtesy of a team-up between Jeff McCord and Paul Pridham, who is perhaps better known to some as Madgarden, the developer behind this year's megahit Gold Nugget Award Winner, *Hodappy Bird* ([Free](#)). The remake was a particularly ambitious one, adding tons of new items and completely redoing the game's visual style. It also added new difficulty settings and the option to play as a male or female adventurer.



Your quest is to descend into the dungeon to retrieve the legendary *Sword*

of *Fargoal*. The dungeon is 20 floors deep, and in the iOS version, the sword rests on the final floor. After laying your hands on the sword, you have exactly 2000 seconds, or just over 33 minutes, to haul your keister back out. Each floor of the dungeon is randomly generated, filled with monsters that will try to kill you, loot that will help you, and treasure boxes that do both at once. There's a temple on each floor that acts as a kind of safe haven where you can heal up without monsters attacking you, and naturally, stairs going up and down. You can engage in combat with enemies simply by pushing your character into them, and if you win, you'll earn some experience points towards gaining a level and increased survivability. Unlike many other roguelikes, the monsters don't take their turns in step with yours, and they can and will move around while you're just standing around. New monsters will spawn in over time, as well, which can lead to a few unpleasant surprises.

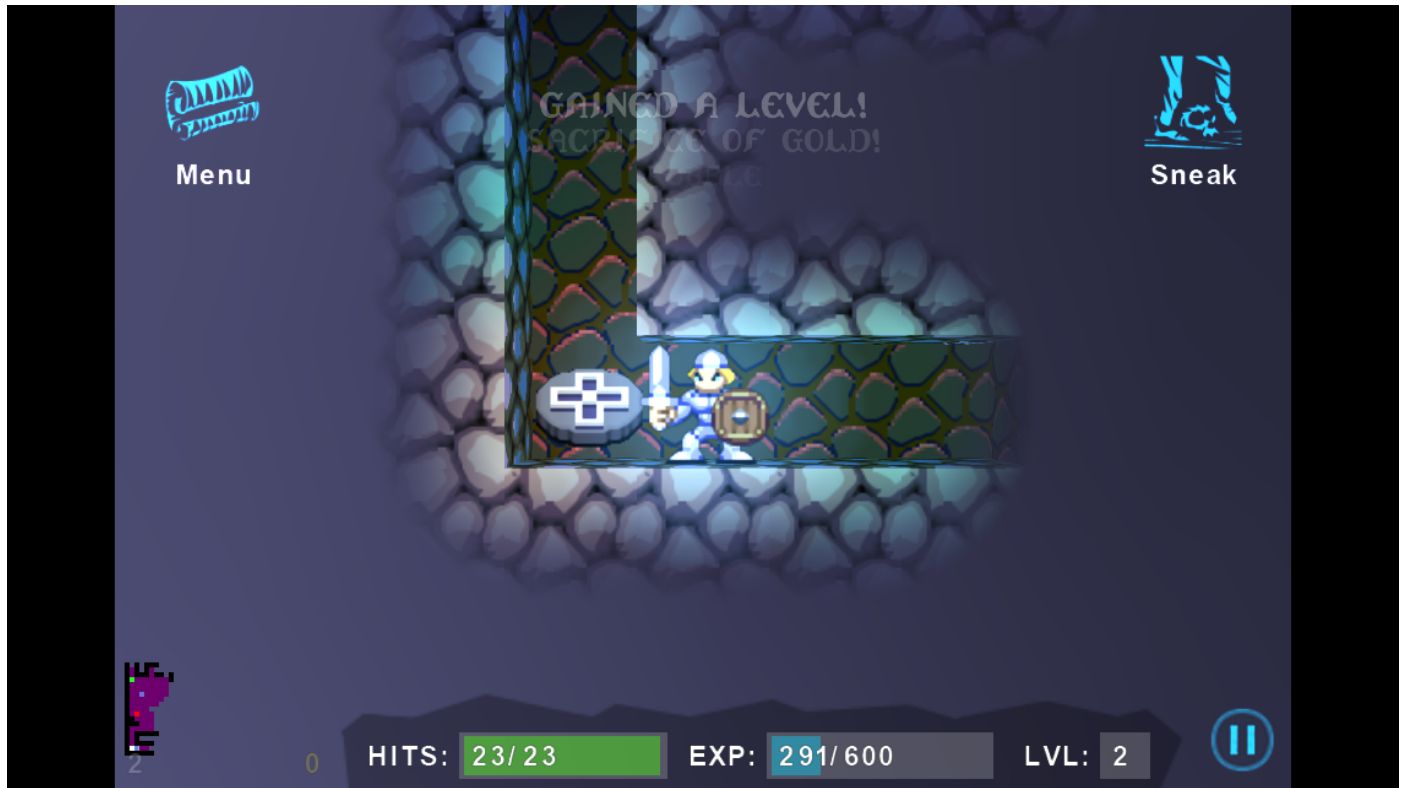
In the C64 version of the game, the levels changed to a new layout every time you left the floor and came back. This meant that your escape after retrieving the sword was a blind run, which made it incredibly hard to get out in time. Of course, that's if you even managed to get the sword in the first place. You really needed an excellent run of luck, even more so than in most modern roguelikes. I mean, you could even hit the floor the sword was on and find there was no path to reach it, forcing you to return to the stairs and roll a new layout for the map that could work for you. There was no saving, no resurrection if you ran out of healing items, no continuing, and no mercy. These days, it's not such a rare thing, but back then, *Sword of Fargoal* was considered a brutal game even by the tough standards of the time.



The iOS version is a bit more lenient, or a lot more, depending on the difficulty setting you choose. There are numerous changes, but the one that works most to the player's general benefit is that the floors are set for each playthrough. That is to say, if you leave the fifth floor and come back, it will still have the same layout as it did the first time. In conjunction with the new mini-map that gets filled out as you explore, navigating the dungeon is a lot less confusing. There are also a whole bunch of new items that help make your character stronger if you can find them. The new difficulty settings really open the game up in a big way, and I think that they're vital to this version's continued appeal.

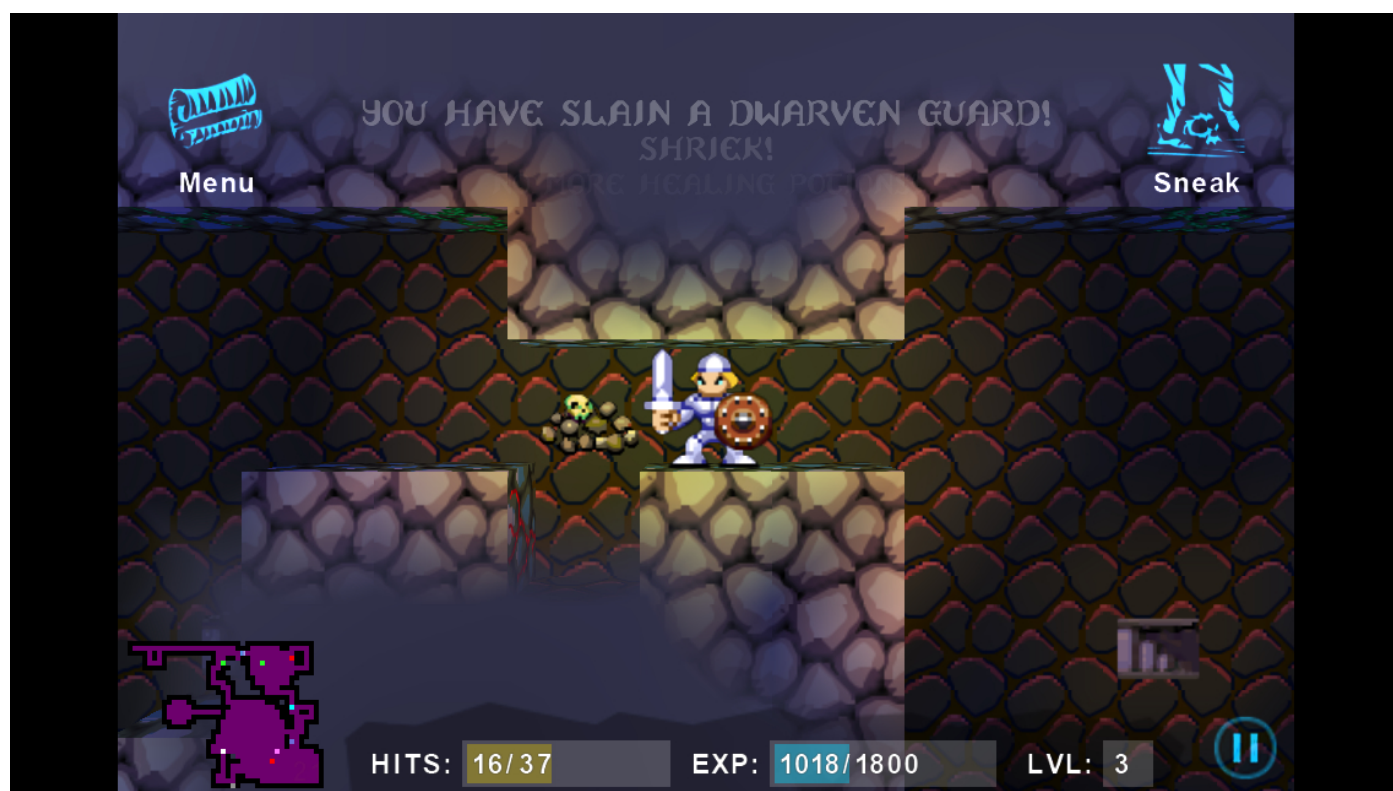
The roguelike genre is something of an impenetrable one for many people. By definition, they are cruel and incredibly capricious games, where your playthrough is typically only going as well as the next move you make. They usually feature permadeath, and for the most part, they use random elements, so you can't even depend on learning broad patterns to help you out. To someone just coming into the genre, it appears to be a sadistic game of rolling the dice where the odds are stacked so heavily against you that you can't possibly win. Veteran players know that mostly isn't true, and that while

roguelikes certainly appear to be based on luck, they're really about making the most of opportunities, mitigating bad luck, and not holding anything back for a rainy day if it means surviving the moment. In many ways, they're a rejection of the habits we learn in other games. It's easy to understand, then, why they seem so imposing to the first-time player.



Sword Of Fargoal has all of that stuff, naturally. In fact, one could easily make the argument that it helped establish most of that stuff. It's interesting, then, that its remake should prove to be one of the better introductions to the genre available today. There have been several attempts to file the edge off of the roguelike genre to give it wider appeal, with Chunsoft and Nintendo's *Pokemon Mystery Dungeon* series demonstrating that you can indeed sell more than a million copies of a roguelike to kids, for example. The problem is, these attempts don't provide any sort of realistic route to the harder stuff. Some of the post-game content in the *Pokemon* or *Chocobo* games can be very tough, but it comes off more like the natural difficulty progression of a game and less like a bridge to the rest of the genre. For most, the answer to the question of where to go next is to simply wait for the next game in the series. The iOS version of *Sword of Fargoal* offers a much better answer.

Its easiest difficulty setting, called Squire Mode, allows you to play through the whole game with a great deal of the sting taken out of losing. While the other two difficulty settings feature the usual permadeath system where death is a final game over, Squire Mode simply sends you back to the last temple you touched with all of your equipment stripped away. Even that is set up in a more lenient fashion, allowing you to recover all of your gear simply by going back to where you died and picking up your bag. It's a relatively minor penalty, though it still serves as one. Most importantly, it allows a new player to get to know the systems behind the game and see what there is to see without kicking them hard every few minutes. It's still enjoyable and satisfying, since the underlying exploration, collection, and leveling are pleasant enough things to occupy your time with, but it's also preparing the player in a subtle way for its real face.



You can learn what each item does, how each monster behaves, what the subtle differences in the flooring can tell you about traps, when to teleport away, and how to survive rough situations, with just enough of the punishment left in to push you towards learning those things. From there, if you choose to tackle one of the more conventional difficulty settings, you

already have a lot of the skills you need to, if not survive, then at least make enough of a go at it that you don't feel robbed. It teaches you that you can do it, and it allows you to learn how by doing it. I think that's why the iOS version of *Fargoal* clicks in a broader way many other roguelikes fail to. If anyone is seeking to dive into the vast ocean of the genre on iOS, *Sword of Fargoal* is still the one I'm likely to recommend first, simply because it's both a very entertaining game and a fine primer.

Of course, just because it's a great choice for beginners, that doesn't mean that there isn't anything here for the veterans. On its other difficulty settings, *Sword of Fargoal* will give you a tough challenge, and its ability to straddle the line between simplicity and complexity is still one of its finer traits. The new items added to the iOS version are just enough to increase your desire to explore without pushing the game into being a full-out loot game, and even all these years down the line, this is a really nice looking remake, containing a lot of modern touches like atmospheric lighting effects while still paying a certain amount of respect to the game's retro origins.



Unfortunately, there haven't been any updates to either version of the game

in a long time. Retina support made it in to both the iPhone-only *Sword of Fargoal* and the iPad-turned-universal *Sword of Fargoal Legends*, but the game still doesn't support the larger screen size of the iPhone 5.

Presumably, if the promised 2.0 update ever comes, that will be included in the package, but for now, it's not something I would hold my breath on. Since the game relies a lot on darkness, the unused portions of the screen aren't terribly obvious, at least, and the controls still work as fine as they ever did. They're a touch sensitive for my liking, but they do the job. I guess while we're on the ports, I should probably address the presence of the two different apps. As mentioned, *Fargoal Legends* was originally an iPad-only version of the game, and it's the one you want if you're still playing on an iPad. The regular *Fargoal* isn't a universal app, though if you're only playing on an iPhone or iPod Touch, it's cheaper and is content-identical.

If you're new to roguelikes or haven't gorged to your satisfaction during the recent genre boom on iOS, *Sword of Fargoal* is safely a recommended reload. This remake was so well-crafted that even five years down the road, it still feels very relevant, and it's a testament to the original game's quality that it can still compete well with its grandchildren. Its wide range of difficulty settings means this is not only a quality example of a roguelike, it's also a really excellent focused RPG experience suitable for people without the time or desire to sink into a longer experience. I certainly enjoyed reacquainting myself with it as a bit of a palate-cleanser before heading into the next big adventure I've got ahead of me.



This game has a lot of fans around here, so I'm eager to hear what you guys think of the game. Do you still have it on your device? Are you still looking forward to *Fargoal 2*, if it ever comes? Leave a comment down below or pop into the [Official RPG Reload Club](#) thread to let me know. I like to talk about RPGs as much as I like to write about them! Don't forget to get your vote in for the next reader's choice article, too. Like I said at the top, this is basically your last chance to be counted for **RPG Reload 008's** topic. I'll be back next week with another great RPG and oh-so-many words, I promise. In the meantime, thanks for reading!

Next Week's Reload Hint: *Time flows like a river...*